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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Unofficially, let the summer fun begin!! Here we are, another Memorial Day weekend. It's great, isn't it? Sure "summer" has been around off and on for the past few weeks, including this week with temperatures in the 90's! This is the week that most people look forward to seeing on the calendar; I know that I do. If you haven't prepared yourself for the summer yet, this is the weekend to get it done.

This is the weekend that I get my vegetable gardens tilled and ready for planting. I make sure that my barbecue grill propane tanks are full, including the spares. Stock up on food that we enjoy cooking on the grill, at least for the present time because it will go quickly! This is the weekend that we get the pool ready to open, if we haven't by now (and we haven't!). And a whole lot of other stuff! Sure, we'll be busy, but it will all be worth it over the next few months!

It's been another one of those long and tiring work weeks leading up to this long holiday weekend. Three grueling days at the golf course for the first part of the week, including my first dose of sunburn. I'll have to get used to that kind of work again quickly! And then I finished off the week at the store with two shifts - Thursday night and Friday during the day. I have the weekend off, or at least until early Monday when I work at the course for an alleged quick "mow and go" shift due to a tournament that morning. So, for the first time in a few years, I'll actually have most of a Memorial Day weekend off. I will take advantage of it!

I was going to talk about the current oil disaster this week, but I'm really not sure what more can be said that hasn't been by every news outlet in the world. Other than the obvious extraordinary impact this "spill" is having (and will have for many years to come) on the area down in the Gulf of Mexico (and potentially further east and north), the most difficult thing to understand is the slow reaction to determine the extent of the problem and quickly react with a viable resolution. Not only those at British Petroleum, but our own government. It appears that we waited, until too late, to realize that BP wasn't prepared to deal with this type of a disaster! Sorry, but this just isn't acceptable. Accidents happen, unfortunately. And worse this time around, many lives were lost on that oil rig.

Do we know of established disaster plans? And not just for the offshore drilling sites, but the Alaskan pipeline, in the Texas oil fields, and other domestic oil sites? If they have them, they should be reviewed and updated. And not only should these areas be prepared for any number of potential accident, but, and not to be an alarmist or anything, but be prepared for potential intentional problems such as terrorist sabotage.

Okay, I didn’t want to get into it, but living in New England, so close to the ocean for most of my life, I understand the extent of what is at stake here as far as the ecosystems and coastlines go. And I’m probably not really fully aware of the real extent of the potential damage this can cause, especially in the long run. And, I have a feeling that Joe will also be mentioning this disaster this week, as well.

So, let’s get back to enjoying a nice long holiday weekend. Yes, it’s a time to welcome and celebrate "summer" but please do so responsibly. Don’t drink and drive, nor do any texting or other distracting things while driving. Have a great long weekend!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone and, as I re-write parts of this column, I see that it’s looking like BP has finally stopped the oil flow from that pesky well, although it’s going to be a while before we’re certain. It IS kind of cool that the video feed from 5,000 feet below the surface is available on the internet (you can go to BP’s website, the government’s site: http://globalwarming.house.gov/spillcam, or just about any news site like CNN or MSNBC or even FOXNews.. despite the fact that streaming video over the internet... not to mention the remote technology itself... if chock full of that thar ’sciency’ stuff that they and their core readership don’t like or trust in the first place.) Oh, uh, ummm.. I’m sorry, was that out loud? [grin]

Anyway, it’s not a done deal yet, folks, so don’t start celebrating just yet.

You see, what happens when they use this "top kill" method is to inject a thick ’mud’ (more on this in a minute) into the well and push it down and in to the well.

Now this ’mud’ is actually, in this case, a combination of shale clay, water, a bunch of additives to keep it liquid when they want it to be, and thickeners like guar or xanthan gum.

This combination makes the mud a non-Newtonian fluid. This class of liquid has always been a favorite of mine. I can hear you groaning already, but I’m going to give you a real quick science lesson here (Oh, I can just hear bits of an MC Hawking song playing in the background).

You see, with ’normal’ fluids, when you increase pressure the fluid flows more freely.

With non-Newtonian fluids, the change is not in sync and sometimes even

goes in reverse... becoming more ’stiff’ as you increase pressure.

A good grade school example of a non-Newtonian fluid is a suspension of corn starch in water. It’s got to be pretty thick. In fact, it LOOKS solid. If you press your finger slowly into it, it slides right in. But if you stab your finger into it quickly and with enough force, the surface of the fluid stiffens and resists. As a matter of fact, there was an episode of MYTH BUSTERS where they used corn starch and water as a non-Newtonian fluid for something.

Anyway, what happens is that they pump this mixture of clay and thickener into the well. The pressure on both sides of the ’mud’ pretty much keeps things status quo as far as thickness is concerned, allowing it to flow into the well. Now with THIS circumstance, since there’s damage to the well itself, a lot of this mud is lost. But enough of it makes its way down into the well to work way down. Now, you’ve got to keep the pressure high to keep the well from just ’pushing back’ and blowing it all out. But you decrease the pressure slowly, allowing the mud to stiffen as the pressure on one side (the ’out’side) slowly decreases. As the pressure on the ’well’ side remains constant, the mud stiffens. Think of it as a sort of big long cork in a very long-necked bottle.

But that’s not the end of the story either. You see, oil wells are fickle creatures and they can suddenly increase or decrease pressure. And with a non-Newtonian fluid... yeah, you can guess what’s coming, can’t you?... it can dislodge this ’cork’ if there’s too much of a pressure change.

So what has to be done from there is that cement has to be pumped in on top of the mud. The mud is necessary to kind of keep the ’cap on the bottle’ while they pump in the cement and let it harden. That’s why they use the mud in the first place. If they could just use cement, they would.

It usually takes around 24 hours for cement to harden, so the mud has to stay in place while that happens. Otherwise the well would just blow cap right off.

Now I know that this all sounds like a lot of "yeah, big deal, that’s not so hard", but you’ve got to remember that this is taking place under about 5,000 feet of water, which exerts a huge amount of pressure. Things react differently under that much pressure, just like the mud we were just talking about, so no one is completely sure that the mud will react exactly as it would up here at sea level, or if the cement will react the same... there are a lot of unknowns involved here and, win, lose or draw, we’ll learn something about dealing with materials that far under water.

Things, in my opinion, will not be as rosy on the surface... there’s a lot of oil out there floating around right now, and it’s messy, gooey, yucky stuff.

What makes it worse is that it’s not ’refined’ oil. The stuff that’s out there is really, for lack of a better word, gross. You’ve seen the pictures of it. It’s nasty and smelly and, worse than that, it doesn’t just float on top of the water. It’s been found more than a hundred feet below the surface, ’suspended’ like a big yucky.. curtain of sludge. I shudder to think about the wildlife that swims through that crap without knowing it’s there until its too late... everything from plankton and krill to whales and dolphins (or are they porpoises?... I don’t remember).

And that’s not even taking into account what happens to a marsh or beach when that stuff ’makes landfall’. There are all manner of ’coastal

creatures' that are going to be affected by this, whether or not the impact to the land is 'severe'.

Some of the stuff in that crude is going to float to the surface. It'll form a slick and keep gases from transferring to and from the water, changing the quality of the water and what can live in it. The 'sheen' on the water will also change how sunlight is reflected or absorbed by the water and the algae in it. Of course, some of this stuff will get broken down by the sunlight and some will bond to calcium and sodium in the water, but guess what? THAT stuff has to go somewhere too. And in most cases, that'll be 'down'.

Some of the stuff in the crude will be heavier than the ocean water and will sink. Along with some of the stuff drifting down from the surface, it'll eventually settle on the sea floor where who knows what kind of trouble it'll cause. I mean, if it's "far enough out", it might well just sit there on the bottom and get covered with silt and stuff and disappear, but there are creatures that live on the sea floor... oysters, clams, sea cucumbers, sponges, etc... and who knows how they'll be affected?

Well, let's just keep our fingers crossed that someone keeps their eyes open and watches what goes on out there. The really cool AND really annoying thing about oceans is that they're all connected. What happens in the Gulf can and probably will affect the Atlantic ocean too. By now you've probably seen the network news graphics of the ocean currents carrying the oil around.

But even if that doesn't happen... even if the oil is confined to the Gulf, the environmental impact is going to be huge. It's going to take years if not decades to figure out exactly what the damages are going to be, and how to fix it.

So I'll ask again what I asked last week: Where are these people who were yelling "Drill baby, drill" before the election? I wonder what they've got to say now.

Well, I've said about all I've got to say for right now. C'mon back next week and we'll talk some more. 'Till then, keep your ears open so you'll always hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Halo: Reach in September!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Google's Pac-Mac Logo Lives On!
  Player of the Year Winners!
  And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

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Halo: Reach Will Continue Top Series in September

Halo. It’s a video-game franchise that stirs the hearts and minds of hard-core gamers everywhere. It’s no surprise, then, that the next installment in the series, Halo: Reach, is making an impact on the video-game market - before it even hits store shelves.

Halo: Reach is the prequel to the number-one game series of all time, and it debuts in the U.S. on Sept. 14. Halo: Reach follows the story of Noble Team, a squad of Spartan soldiers, as they make their final stand on planet Reach. Planet Reach is humanity’s last line of defense between the terrifying Covenant and Earth.

Bungie developed the game exclusively for the Xbox 360. Judging by the history-making beta release of the game, which drew 2.7 million gamers to a multiplayer test drive on Xbox LIVE, Microsoft and Bungie both have something to smile about.

"It’s certainly good for Microsoft to have the Halo franchise as part of the Xbox experience," said Michael Gartenberg, a partner at Altimeter Group. "Halo has traditionally been one of those titles that not only sells a lot of copies, but also sells a lot of hardware as well. There’s no reason to think this next version of Halo won’t continue in that tradition."

Just how popular is Halo? The last game, Halo 3, sold about eight million copies. Halo: Reach might surpass that. In the multiplayer beta on Xbox LIVE, gamers played Halo: Reach more than 13 million times and logged more than 16 million hours of online game play. That adds up to more than 1,826 years of total play time in just over a two-week period. Halo fans have logged more than two billion hours of game play on Xbox LIVE in the past decade. To date, Halo titles have exceeded sales of 34 million.

Beyond the numbers, one could look at how Halo has seeped into other parts of pop culture. During the past 10 years, the Halo franchise has inspired multiple New York Times best-selling novels, comic books, action figures, and apparel. Fans have also shared millions of pieces of user-generated content, created original Halo machinima series, and even held Halo-themed weddings.

Bungie is selling pre-orders of Halo: Reach in three flavors: Standard, limited and legendary. The standard edition sells for $60, and the limited and legendary editions will retail for $80 and $150, respectively. What’s the difference? The limited and legendary editions include extras.

For example, the legendary edition offers a 10-inch-tall, hand-painted, and individually molded Noble Team statue. Fans can get a token to unlock an exclusive in-game Spartan Recon Helmet by picking up a copy of the game on launch day at North American retail stores, and outside of North America by making a pre-order reservation at participating retailers.

"There’s no doubt in my mind that Halo: Reach will be one of the biggest games and hottest entertainment products of the year," said Bob

McKenzie, senior vice president of merchandising at GameStop. "Pre-orders for Halo: Reach have been off the charts, with fans snapping up the limited and legendary editions since they were introduced just a month ago. Overall, it’s a real testament to the passion of the Halo fan base."

Player of the Year Winners Will Receive Backyard Sports Prize Packs

Atari, Inc., one of the world’s most recognized videogame publishers, announced an expansion of its relationship with the Baseball Youth organization through which its Backyard Sports: Sandlot Sluggers title will serve as the exclusive videogame sponsor of the 2010 Baseball Youth Player of the Year Award.

The Baseball Youth Player of the Year is presented annually to one player in both the 10 & under and 12 & under age group categories. The award campaign runs concurrently with the Baseball Youth Road Trip FANFEST, an interactive traveling tour visiting youth baseball tournaments across the United States. The two winners of the Baseball Youth Player of the Year Award will receive Backyard Sports prize packs including T-Shirts, videogames and a feature in an upcoming Backyard Sports videogame that is in the works. The award winners will be announced live on the MLB Network on August 29th during the New Era National Youth Baseball Championships taking place in Memphis, TN. More details about the Baseball Youth Player of the Year award can be found at www.baseballyouth.com <http://www.baseballyouth.com/>.

"Atari is proud to partner with Baseball Youth to celebrate the achievements that kids make every day in sports, as well as support active and positive youth lifestyles" says Jim Wilson, President and CEO of Atari, Inc. "The Backyard Sports game series, the number one kids sports franchise, perfectly aligns with Baseball Youth and their mission of encouraging friendly competition and participation in sports."

Scott Hacker, President of Dugout Media adds, "We are very much looking forward to having Atari and its Backyard Sports franchise on board as the exclusive videogame sponsor of the Baseball Youth Player of the Year. Backyard Sports: Sandlot Sluggers is a playful, entertaining videogame version of our beloved sport that our players and families can relate to and interact with in a fun and wholesome way. Having young players hone their understanding of - and passion for - the game both on and off the field is a great combination."

Backyard Sports: Sandlot Sluggers, developed by HB Studios, is a completely new take on a longtime favorite franchise with all-new features, updated graphics, enhanced gameplay, and extensive options that will keep casual players and gamers alike enthusiastically entertained. Backyard Sports: Sandlot Sluggers is feature-rich with multiplayer tournaments, mini games, eight different interactive fields, season mode, family mode, quick play and an all new story mode setting, never seen before in a kids sports game. Super charged power-ups and stunning visuals make gameplay result in an irresistible game for kids. Backyard Sports: Sandlot Sluggers will be available May 25 for Xbox 360 videogame and entertainment system from Microsoft ($29.99), Wii ($29.99), Nintendo DS ($29.99) and PC Download ($29.99).

In addition to being the exclusive sponsor of the Baseball Youth Player

of the Year award, */Backyard Sports: Sandlot Sluggers/* also serves as the exclusive game featured on the East and West coasts for the Baseball Youth Road Trip FANFEST. On-site booth activities will include game demos and sampling. Atari will reward the top 20 Player of the Year finalists with the Backyard Sports: Sandlot Sluggers videogame and a Backyard Sports T-shirt. Atari will also provide all Player of the Year nominees from the East and Midwest Baseball Youth Road Trip FANFEST tours a Backyard Sports premium offered at its Player of the Year booth only.

Violent Video Games Touted as Learning Tool

You’re at the front lines shooting Nazis before they shoot you. Or you’re a futuristic gladiator in a death match with robots.

Either way, you’re playing a video game - and you may be improving your vision and other brain functions, according to research presented Thursday at a New York University conference on games as a learning tool.

"People that play these fast-paced games have better vision, better attention and better cognition," said Daphne Bavelier, an assistant professor in the department of brain and cognitive science at the University of Rochester.

Bavelier was a presenter at Games for Learning, a daylong symposium on the educational uses of video games and computer games.

The event, the first of its kind, was an indication that electronic games are gaining legitimacy in the classroom.

President Barack Obama recently identified the creation of good educational software as one of the "grand challenges for American innovation," and the federal Department of Education’s assistant deputy secretary for the Office of Innovation and Improvement, Jim Shelton, attended Thursday’s conference.

Panelists discussed how people learn and how games can be engineered to be even more educational.

"People do learn from games," said J. Dexter Fletcher of the Institute for Defense Analyses.

Sigmund Tobias of the State University of New York at Albany said an Israeli air force study found that students who played the game "Space Fortress" had better rankings in their pilot training than students who did not.

He added that students who played "pro-social" games that promote cooperation were more likely than others to help out in real-life situations like intervening when someone is being harassed.

Bavelier’s research has focused on so-called first-person shooter games like "Unreal Tournament" and "Medal of Honor," in which the player is an Allied solder during World War II.

"You have to jump into vehicles, you have to crouch and hide," said Tammy Schachter, a spokeswoman for game developer Electronic Arts Inc.

Bavelier said playing the kill-or-be-killed games can improve peripheral vision and the ability to see objects at dusk, and the games can even be used to treat amblyopia, or lazy eye, a disorder characterized by indistinct vision in one eye.

She said she believes the games can improve math performance and other brain tasks.

"We are testing this hypothesis that when you play an action video game, what you do is you learn to better allocate your resources," she said. "In a sense you learn to learn. ... You become very good at adapting to whatever is asked of you."

Bavelier believes the games will eventually become part of school curriculums, but "it’s going to take a generation."

Schachter said the purpose of "Medal of Honor" and other games is to have fun, and any educational benefits are a bonus.

"Through entertainment these games test your memory skills, your eye-hand coordination, your ability to detect small activities on the screen and interact with them," she said.

Not everyone is a fan.

Gavin McKiernan, the national grassroots director for the Parents Television Council, an advocacy group concerned about sex and violence in the media, said that when it comes to violent video games, any positive effects are outweighed by the negative.

"You are not just passively watching Scarface blow away people," McKiernan said. "You are actually participating. Doing these things over and over again is going to have an effect."

Bavelier said games could be developed that would harness the positive effects of the first-person shooter games without the violence.

"As you know, most of us females just hate those action video games," she said. "You don’t have to use shooting. You can use, for example, a princess which has a magic wand and whenever she touches something, it turns into a butterfly and sparkles."

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Google’s Playable Pac-Mac Logo Lives On

In celebration of Pac-Man’s 30th anniversary, Google on Friday converted its doodleto a playable version of the arcade classic. But you knew that already. It was all anyone could talk (or tweet) about for several hours.

Due to its overwhelming popularity, Google is keeping the doodle online forever. Google.com has reverted to the standard multi-colored Google logo, but a visit to Google.com/Pacman will reveal a recreation of Friday's homepage. Click "Insert Coin" to fire up the game. Click it twice to bring up a two-player version of the game, complete with a playable Ms. Pac-Man.

"Thanks to [Pac-Man maker] NAMCO for helping to make this wonderful collaboration happen," Marissa Mayer, vice president of search products and user experience, wrote in a blog post.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Facebook To Simplify Privacy Controls Amid Unrest

Facebook is simplifying its privacy controls amid growing unrest from many of its users.

Protesters have been organizing campaigns to quit Facebook and privacy groups have complained to regulators after Facebook announced new features last month, including "instant personalization" that tailors other websites to users' Facebook profiles.

"A lot of people are upset with us," Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg acknowledged at a news conference Wednesday at the company's Palo Alto, Calif., headquarters.

One complaint has been over the fact that while Facebook allows users to hide their list of interests on their personal profile pages, the user would still show up elsewhere as "liking" that band, company or hobby. Zuckerberg said that under the simplified controls, privacy preferences will be extending to those other places as well.

Zuckerberg said the company is also making it easier for users to decline the instant personalization feature.

He said that as Facebook offered more granularity in its privacy choices, the settings have become too complex for many users. He said Facebook is trying to simplify the controls - and making them apply retroactively and to new services that have yet to launch.

Facebook said the changes will be rolled out in the coming weeks. It's not yet clear whether the latest changes will quell user unease. Facebook hopes they do.

"One of the big takeaways is just don't mess with the privacy stuff for a long time," Zuckerberg said.

In a statement, the Center for Democracy and Technology, a Washington-based advocacy group, said that "while more work still needs to be done, these changes are the building blocks for giving people what they want and deserve."

Google Sued Over Wi-Fi Sniffing

Galaxy Internet Services, an ISP for homes and businesses in Massachusetts, has filed a class-action lawsuit against Google over the search company's admitted blunder that it sniffed and stored data from Wi-Fi networks.

Through its legal representative, Carp Law Offices, Galaxy said on Tuesday that Google violated U.S. federal and Massachusetts privacy laws when it captured residential and business Web activity data.

Google declined to comment about the lawsuit.

Earlier this month, Google disclosed that its Street View cars, which take photos for services like Google Maps, had since 2006 mistakenly collected "payload data" from Wi-Fi networks they drove by that weren't password-protected.

Google did intentionally record the networks' names (SSIDs) and their routers' unique identifying numbers (MAC), but has stopped doing this.

Galaxy filed its lawsuit on its behalf and on behalf of its customers and anyone else similarly affected in Massachusetts, and is seeking class certification.

Galaxy is also requesting that Google be forbidden from destroying the Wi-Fi data it collected and that it be required to pay damages as determined by a jury, along with attorneys' fees.

France and Netherlands Plan Internet Anti-Censorship Drive

France and the Netherlands have joined forces to develop an international code of conduct against Internet censorship, the Dutch foreign ministry said Tuesday.

"The Netherlands and France are taking the initiative to develop an international code of conduct for the freedom of traffic on the Internet," the ministry said in a statement.

The foreign ministers from both countries met in Rotterdam and expressed concern over a recent rise in Internet censorship.

A pilot group is due to meet in the coming weeks in Paris, and will bring together governments, rights organisations and web-based businesses all working to protect freedom on the Internet, the French foreign ministry said.

As well as the code of conduct, the working group will aim to set up at the international level a mechanism to track the commitments made by governments regarding freedom of expression on the Internet.

New Net Domains Break Language Barriers

The use of non-Latin characters in Internet addresses is a key step to opening up the Web and making it more "personalized" for billions of users, the head of the nonprofit body that oversees Internet addresses said Monday.

Rod Beckstrom, CEO of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, said around half of the people using the Internet do not use Latin script. But the recent approval of Arabic and Russian characters for domain name suffixes will help bridge that linguistic barrier and encourage more users online, he said.

"This is part of the Internet becoming more truly global," Beckstrom told The Associated Press on the sidelines of an event celebrating the introduction of such suffixes in Arabic. "We see this just opening up and making the Internet more global."

"It seems to be a more important offering for the psyche of people. Our language is part of our culture and our identity, and having ... the ability to express our domain in our chosen language is something that people feel very powerfully about," Beckstrom said.

Earlier this month, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Russia become the first nations to get Internet addresses entirely in non-Latin characters.

Egypt, for example, secured the right to the ".masr" domain (written in Arabic).

The step marked a fundamental shift in the Internet domain name system since its creation in the 1980s.

Until the approvals were received for Arabic and Russian, websites had to end their addresses with suffixes like ".com" that were written in Latin characters - a restriction that posed challenges to expanding the reach of the Net to people who could not read such script.

Beckstrom, in comments echoed earlier by Egypt’s Information Technology Minister Tarek Kamel, said lifting the language barrier would allow new and unprecedented access to the Internet.

Kamel told reporters earlier Monday that of the 60 million mobile device users in Egypt, only about 17 million were online. The new system would greatly boost those numbers, he said.

"Now we have a stronger reason for inclusion, for bringing them and making them part of this revolution that is happening worldwide," Kamel said.

Beckstrom said that Arabic is the seventh most common language currently on the Internet.

That figure reflects the rapid growth in Internet use in the Mideast, where technical issues and political constraints have at time served as serious impediments to the expansion of the Web in the region.

While Egypt was among the first to submit an application last year for the new domains, other nations have jumped in, as well.

ICANN said it has received a total of 21 requests for such domains, representing 11 languages, since it began accepting applications in November.

Beckstrom declined to say when additional approvals could be made, noting that the process of setting up the domains took years of technical and policy work.

"It takes some energy to do the work on the technical script selection," he said, listing just one of the challenges countries must tackle before getting their domains approved.

Focus on Content as AOL Marks 25th Birthday

AOL marked its 25th birthday Monday with chief executive Tim Armstrong saying the once high-flying Web company would focus on creating quality content and advertising as it maps out its future.

Armstrong, in an interview with the CNBC television channel, said the first phase of the Internet was about "access" - an area where AOL was a Web pioneer with its dial-up connection business.

"The second phase has really been about the platforms - the Googles, the Facebooks," he said.

"And the next wave is really going to be about content," said Armstrong, a former senior Google executive who took over the reins at AOL a little over a year ago.

"We have sort of pivoted the company to really focus on what we think is going to be the next decade of growth on the Internet which is really about high-scale quality content and great advertising online," Armstrong said.

"We see the Internet as a big open pipe that could be filled with a lot better and more high-quality content," he told CNBC. "And that’s really our plan, to put technology and journalism together."

With Patch.com, Armstrong said AOL had dispatched full-time journalists to about 50 towns across the United States to provide local news coverage and "we’re going to go to hundreds of towns this year."

"We have probably hired more journalists on a global basis than any other organization has," Armstrong said.

AOL has also launched Seed.com to recruit freelance writing talent to crank out stories for its array of websites on topics ranging from pets and sports to politics and technology.

In what is considered one of the most disastrous mergers ever, Time Warner combined with America Online in 2001 at the height of the dot-com boom with AOL using its inflated stock as currency for the transaction.

Time Warner was forced in 2002 to massively write down the value of AOL and the AOL name was removed from the group’s corporate title in 2003.

AOL, whose properties include online map service Mapquest, technology blog Engadget, social network Bebo and other sites, was spun off by Time Warner in December into an independent company.

AOL is currently the number four gateway to the Web after Google, Microsoft and Yahoo! and its dial-up Web access business has been gradually supplanted by high-speed broadband services.

Since taking over at AOL in March of last year, Armstrong, has embarked on an aggressive round of cost-cutting and the company will have around 4,400 employees after restructuring compared with 19,000 in 2006.

Dell’s Streak Readies for Battle with iPad

Dell Inc said its Streak tablet computer can double as a mobile phone and will have a front-facing camera for videoconferencing - features it hopes will help the new gadget compete against Apple Inc’s iPad.

The five-inch tablet will debut in Britain next month through mobile carrier O2, a unit of Spain’s Telefonica, and Carphone Warehouse. Dell has yet to announce pricing for the Streak, which it said will appear in the United States sometime during the summer.

The company formally unveiled the Streak on Tuesday, after Chief Executive Michael Dell gave the tech world a glimpse of the tablet at a conference two weeks ago in San Francisco.

Dell will become the first major electronics maker to take on the 9.7-inch iPad with a device that runs on Google Inc’s Android operating system, more commonly found on smartphones.

"It’s portable and mobile. You can put it in your pocket," said IDC analyst Will Stofega, who has tried out the device. "It is interesting and infinitely usable."

Android is gaining ground on the iPhone in the smartphone market, but it is not yet clear whether Google and Dell will be able to take on Apple in the tablet market.

"Can Dell sell millions of these? That’s a tall order. There is certainly the potential. If it is priced right and if the thing sort of does what it’s supposed to," Stofega said.

The Streak, which will have a slot for external memory cards, is part of Dell’s plan to expand sales of mobile devices to help boost revenue after it has slipped from being the world’s largest PC maker to No. 3 by volume.

Forrester analyst Charles Golvin said he was skeptical that Dell could catch up with the iPad in one key area.

"Dell’s entry into the phone/tablet market is marked by some nice hardware, but Dell still lacks the one element that will matter most in differentiating itself in the flood of Android devices, and that’s skill

in software," he said.

More than 200,000 software applications work with both the iPhone and the iPad, which was launched in the U.S. in April and goes on sale internationally on Friday.

Stephen Felice, who runs Dell's consumer, small and medium business divisions, told the Reuters Global Technology Summit in San Francisco, last week that the Streak would be aimed at consumers but that the PC maker's goal is to eventually build tablets for large corporations.

One Laptop Per Child's Next Move: The $100 Tablet

The nonprofit organization that has tried to produce a $100 laptop for children in the world's poorest places is throwing in the towel on that idea - and jumping on the tablet bandwagon.

One Laptop Per Child's next computer will be based on chipmaker Marvell Technology Group Ltd.'s Moby tablet design. Marvell announced a prototype of the device this year and said it costs about $99.

Nicholas Negroponte, founder of One Laptop Per Child, is optimistic his organization will be able to keep the price under $100 in part because Marvell plans to market its tablets widely to schools and health care institutions.

"We want to see the price drop, and volume is the key to that," Negroponte said.

The quirky green and white XO laptop sold by One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) to governments and organizations in countries such as Afghanistan and Uruguay wasn't destined for such a broad audience. OLPC had to repeatedly scale back expectations for how many of the laptops it could produce, and it didn't get the price much below $200, twice the price specified by the device's "$100 laptop" nickname.

In 2005, Negroponte envisioned having built 100 million laptops in about two years. Today, 2 million of the machines are in use.

The XO was also more expensive to produce than a tablet would be because of its many moving parts and features meant to withstand glaring sun, blowing sand and spotty access to electricity. In some cases, OLPC had to change the XO's design by region. For example, the physical keyboard had to be customized for students in countries that don't use a Latin alphabet. It would be less expensive to change the software behind touch-screen keyboards.

Marvell's co-founder, Weili Dai, said the company has also found ways to cut costs in the way it's designing the chips.

The new tablets will have at least one, and maybe two, video cameras. They'll sport Wi-Fi connections to the Internet, "multi-touch" screens and have enough power to play high-definition and 3-D video. Marvel hopes to make the screens 8.5 inches by 11 inches, the size of a standard sheet of paper. Unlike Apple Inc.'s iPad tablet, the device will also work with plug-in peripherals such as mice.

Negroponte said he eventually wants the tablets to run some version of the free Linux PC operating software. But the first generation of the "XO 3.0" tablet will likely use Android, the mobile-device operating system from Google Inc., or something similar.

Although his group, which is based in Cambridge, Mass., worked with Microsoft Corp. to get its Windows operating system running on the XO laptops, Negroponte said the new tablets will not use Windows 7 because the software requires too much memory and computing power.

Negroponte said he plans to unveil the tablet device at the annual International Consumer Electronics Show in January.

The One Laptop Per Child project has its share of skeptics, who have questioned the possibility of manufacturing a laptop for $100 and the point of computers in countries that lack basic infrastructure.

Even so, OLPC's work turned competitors on to the growing market for technology in developing countries. Companies including Intel Corp. came up with their own designs for inexpensive laptops for kids, while other organizations figured out ways to turn regular desktop computers into multiple workstations, drastically cutting costs for school computer labs and Internet cafes.

The scramble to produce inexpensive laptops for kids in developing countries also helped prime the pump for the recent flood of "netbooks," which are smaller, cheaper and less powerful than laptops.

Negroponte said the last few months have been a turning point for his group.

"People are no longer asking 'Does this work?'" Negroponte said. "The one question I hear all the time is, how do I pay for it? How do the economics work?"

Nitro PDF Reader Out To Blow Away Adobe

Nitro PDF Software on Tuesday released a free reader built to break rival Adobe System's grip on the world's top digital document format.

Nitro not only lets people read paperwork scanned in Portable Document Format (PDF) but lets it be annotated, filled-in, or otherwise altered and then saved as files.

Adobe's widely used free reader lets people see and print digitized documents but not tinker with them, a restriction that can foil efforts such as filling in emailed or online PDF forms.

Adobe sells premium versions of PDF software that allow for document creation.

"Adobe hasn't adapted the product to how people have evolved in working with PDF files," said Lonn Lorenz, who worked at Adobe for a decade before becoming Nitro chief product officer in 2009.

"The fact that Adobe hasn't done it just doesn't make sense. We hear from people that they have no love for Adobe Reader; we want people to

have a lot of love for Nitro Reader."

Nitro PDF Reader was available for download online at nitroreader.com.

Nitro touted its reader as more secure than Adobe software at a time when booby-trapping PDF files have been branded a prime method of attack by hackers.

Symantec recently reported that the number of PDF files tainted with malicious code skyrocketed in 2009 to represent 49 percent of Web-based attacks, topping the category.

"One of the big things about Adobe Reader is how vulnerable it is," Lorenz said.

Security built into Nitro includes letting users block access to selected websites, lock files with passwords, and turn off Java Script technology exploited by hackers to execute attacks.

Nitro Reader also lets people scan signatures into computers and add them to PDF documents.

"The whole point is to enable users to get the work done and move on," Lorenz said. "This stuff is a no-brainer but no one else has done it."

Nitro sells professional PDF software that competes with Adobe, but the reader released on Tuesday is the first free offering to let people do more than simply read and print such files.

"We saw a big hole in the market," said Nitro senior vice president of sales and marketing Gina O'Reilly. "There was nobody else offering free, powerful, no-strings-attached tools for PDF functionality."

Nitro is betting that if it wins fans for its free Reader, a percentage will upgrade to a professional version that the 10-year-old San Francisco firm sells for 99 dollars.

"No one has offered functionality to work with PDF without a catch; until now," O'Reilly said. "Adobe Reader is one of those things people just have to put up with. That is something we want to turn on its head."

The assault on Adobe Reader comes as the California firm's Flash video software has been shunned by iPhone, iPad, and iPod maker Apple.

A public feud between the companies has included Apple chief executive Steve Jobs listing what he sees as Flash flaws.

"It does give me a bit of a smile," Lorenz said of taking on Adobe on the PDF front. "But we just wanted a PDF reader that people want to use, it just works. The fact that Adobe hasn't done it just doesn't make sense to users."

Nitro Reader for English debuts worldwide Tuesday, with versions tailored for other languages coming "hot on its heels," according to the firm.

Poisoned PDFs? Here's Your Antidote

Attacks employing poisoned PDF files have leaped to the top of the threat list, according to statistics from major security companies. Symantec reports that suspicious PDF files skyrocketed in 2009 to represent 49 percent of Web-based attacks that the company detected, up from only 11 percent in 2008. The next-most-common attack, involving a good old Internet Explorer flaw, was far behind at 18 percent.

In a typical scenario, crooks might hijack a legitimate site and insert a PDF file made to exploit flaws in Adobe Reader. They then link to that PDF via social-engineering lures such as spam or comments on a blog or social network. Even astute users who check the link would see a legit domain. Not knowing the site was hacked, they would be more likely to download and open the file.

Now, a new threat allows for launching malware hidden inside a PDF file. In this type of attack, discovered by researcher Didier Stevens, opening the PDF file triggers an attempt to install the malware. The action causes Adobe Reader to produce a confirmation pop-up, which gives you a chance to halt the attack by clicking the Do Not Open' button - but Stevens found that attackers could tweak the pop-up's message. His example reads, "To view the encrypted message in this PDF document, select 'Do not show this message again' and click the Open button!" Using such a message, attackers could allay potential victims' suspicion.

Here's the kicker: This embedded-file threat makes creative use of functionality built into the PDF standard. As such, it works not only on Adobe Reader but on other PDF readers, too, even if they're up-to-date. The makers of the Zeus Trojan horse are already using this new technique to spread their evil software.

Changing a program setting in the current version of Adobe Reader can help. Head to Preferences, Trust Manager, and deselect Allow opening of non-PDF file attachments with external applications. See the Adobe Reader Blog for more details.

The latest 3.3 update for the Foxit PDF reader also has a new Safe Reading setting-enabled by default under a new Trust Manager section in the preferences-that likewise blocks embedded programs from running.

Since traditional PDF exploits almost always hunt for one of the many holes in Adobe Reader, using an alternative PDF program is a good idea. But it's no guarantee of safety. When the embedded-file attack first surfaced, Foxit didn't even display a confirmation pop-up-it simply allowed the attack to proceed. Whichever reader you use, it's vital to keep it up-to-date. Both Adobe and Foxit are working on new security features to further mitigate the embedded-file risk.

Finally, a good antivirus program may stop a malicious PDF before it can launch an attack. And VirusTotal.com is excellent for scanning any downloaded or e-mailed file with a multitude of antivirus engines. Regardless, always back up your defenses with your own good sense.

3 Indicted in $100 Million Internet 'Scareware' Scheme

Three men have been indicted in connection with a Ukraine-based fraud scheme which tricked Internet users into believing their computers were

infected and collected some 100 million dollars, officials said Thursday.

Internet users in more than 60 countries purchased more than one million bogus software products from the three defendants, two Americans and a Swede, the Justice Department said in a statement.

Bjorn Daniel Sundin, 31, a Swedish citizen believed to be in Sweden, and Shaileshkumar Jain, 40, a US citizen believed to be living in Ukraine, were each charged with 24 counts of wire fraud and one count each of conspiracy to commit computer fraud and computer fraud.

James Reno, 26, of Amelia, Ohio, was charged with 12 counts of wire fraud and one count each of conspiracy to commit computer fraud and computer fraud and is expected to appear before a US District Court in Chicago.

"These defendants allegedly preyed on innocent computer users, exploiting their fraudulently induced fears for personal gain," said FBI special agent Robert Grant.

Sundin and Jain were the owners and operators of a company called Innovative Marketing located in Kiev that purported to sell anti-virus and computer repair software. Jain was IM’s chief executive while Sundin served as chief technology officer.

They are accused of placing fake advertisements on legitimate company websites which led Internet users to falsely believe that their computers had been infected with a virus or had critical errors.

The Internet users were then induced to buy software products with names such as "ErrorSafe" and "DriveCleaner" to fix the purported problems, paying online by credit card to bank accounts in Europe controlled by the defendants.

The scheme employing what is commonly known as "scareware" is considered one of the fastest-growing and most prevalent types of fraud on the Web.

Each count of wire fraud carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison.

Yankee Stadium Bans Apple iPad

Are things a little dull these days at Yankees games? Don’t bring your iPad to pass the time.

Apple’s popular tablet has been added to Yankee Stadium’s existing security policy, which bans laptops at the park, according to a Yahoo Sports blog.

The writer notes that the rule is somewhat absurd, because even the TSA doesn’t require you to take the iPad out of your luggage during screening, and some people might want to use it on the long commute to and from the ballpark. However, he also notes that this is a high-class problem. And maybe you should put down the iPad and, you know, watch the game?

NYC Mayor Announces $22 Million Fund for Tech Startups

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has a message for computer geeks everywhere: Forget sunny Silicon Valley and launch your company here.

Bloomberg made his pitch Tuesday at a gathering of technology entrepreneurs, announcing the creation of a city-sponsored $22 million venture fund that will invest in promising tech companies headquartered in New York.

The city's Economic Development Corporation will invest $3 million in the fund while FirstMark Capital, a New York-based venture capital fund will provide up to $19 million more.

The backdrop for Bloomberg's announcement was TechCrunch Disrupt, a media and technology conference that draws tech entrepreneurs from across the country.

Bloomberg, 68, is a multibillionaire who made his fortune starting Bloomberg LP, a financial data and news company. He reminded the crowd that he was a tech pioneer long before the Internet existed and offered up some of his other high-tech credentials as well.

"Before this morning's conference I updated my Facebook page, sent a Tweet, browsed my Digg feed and checked in at Foursquare," he said. "I even posted a personal ad on Craigslist: Cleveland basketball star to play basketball in the Big Apple."

It was a joking reference to the city's efforts to woo LeBron James of the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Asked why a tech startup should choose New York over the warmer West Coast climes, Bloomberg said that venture capital funding of companies in New York was up 19 percent last year even as it fell elsewhere amid the poor economy. He said the creativity and talent in New York was unmatched anywhere.

"It's a great place where intellectual capital is important. If you want to compete in the big pond, if you want a breadth of cultural opportunities ... this is the place to come," Bloomberg said.

He said New York should be particularly attractive to tech companies because it is "the most immigrant-friendly city in America." He said that both the tech economy and the larger U.S. economy thrived with more immigrants, not less.

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